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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for improving undergraduate language texts focus on four areas of concern. The author recommends that: (1) texts carefully delimit and objectively specify their scope, (2) writing be personalized, (3) materials be contextually exciting and challenging, and (4) objectives be "goal-oriented." (RL)

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SUBSTANTIVE PROBLEMS IN THE PREPARATION OF PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS ON THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL *

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This topic no doubt sounds ponderous, pretentious and possibly vague. What's more, it is also lengthy and may even be somewhat misleading. So far, so good. Situation normal: all's well in our academic grove. Or is it?

Have we as teacher-scholars seriously thought about the meaning of the phrase "to deliver a paper" (I can think of various things that could mean), or "to give a talk" (how can one "give" talk?), or even further: "to do a book" or worse yet "to do a book for such-and-such a publisher"? To put it another way, do we choose words carefully to describe what we do in our profession? Do we pick our words deliberately so they really get across what we want them to, or do we too just grasp for the ready-made though often inappropriate model phrase. In short, are we saying (and meaning) what needs to be said -- and meant?

* An address given to the Pedagogical Seminar for Germanic Philology at a meeting held during the MLA Convention, Dec. 1971.

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As we are about to get down to the "business" of our Seminar for another and a very important year, let's think quite precisely about what we ought to mean when we -- and this expression is chosen deliberately -- "write for our students and colleagues", that is, when we publish materials for undergraduate teaching. Our remarks will have as their major thrust, of course, the teaching of Germanic philology to undergraduates, because this is our common interest; this is why we are here. But for reasons which should emerge in the course of our thinking together, as well as from a sober awareness of our current academic climate, the suggestions outlined here for pedagogical writing allude to a number of substantive, or if you prefer, "substantial" problems we now face with our teaching texts.

A logical first requirement would be that anything labelled "an Introduction to...", "Elementary..." or "First Year..." more consistently adhere to "truth in packaging". The key word here is basic. How many "introductions" introduce too much material too fast? How many authors let hopelessly irrelevant or obviously more advanced items clog a chapter whose real task is to get fundamental concepts across clearly? This criticism will be levelled against first year German as well as

graduate courses in Gothic, both of which are traditionally course-cataloged as "introductory". It's not fair play and it's not smart pedagogy -- in 101 or 601. The good basic book or good basic course emphasizes fundamental facts and imports only essential principles. It assumes nothing, save perhaps general undergraduate standing. It starts from ground zero, gradually coordinating the basic areas of the subject into a coherent, compact whole. The larger, organic overview ought never be abandoned for the luxury of dwelling on special interests within the larger field.

And none of us as teachers or writers need fear epithets of "superficial", "oberflächlich" or similar tags from colleagues or students. A first coat by definition has to cover the whole surface and must be given sufficient time to penetrate thoroughly before anything new may be applied. The content and presentation of the first book in the PSGP Series will take great care to properly introduce and thoroughly initiate the novice into the fascination of philology. An abrupt plunge in medias res runs the risk of turning away once interested students who have grown either bored or perplexed.

A second requirement is that writing for undergraduates be personal. An author should be attempting to talk with

rather than <u>speak to</u> (especially down to) a student. The grammar explanations in some textbooks still read like a code of law. Some more recent attempts have successfully managed to engage the student in a kind of mental dialog. The presentation is witty and is obviously trying to "speak" in current language. If we agree that such updatedness, such "with-it-ness" and transmitting on student frequency is desirable in our classroom teaching, why not strive for the same in our textbook writing?

Current trends in foreign language teaching have been steadily moving toward more individualized, custom-designed programs. We are at the doorway - at least I would like to believe - of a new humanism, an era of personalized pedagogy, and are consciously leaving behind the mechanistic, rote, lock-step automation. And the new key no longer quite fits the door of the 70's. Students today aspire to more than parrotry and seek to discover more identity than a social security number or an assigned lab seat. When we teach and when we write, a more person-to-person, a more human approach would seem indicated.

And chances are that if that second quality is present, a third will follow: namely that the subject matter will become <u>exciting</u>. Can philology be exciting? I think we

would all say yes, but do we communicate our enthusiasm to our undergraduates? Do we compensate and adjust for any inherent dullness or abstraction in the material by pulling these abstractions down to earth, by making the apparently remote quite aktuell? Those of us involved in the production of our seminar's first publication, the so-called textbook, will try our hardest to make language live and breathe for our students. Why kid ourselves: a warmed-over, timid, la-dee-da approach will not bring us students nor advance our cause. We formed this seminar to "spread the good news" and bring something once accessible only to the graduate student now readily within the grasp of the undergraduate. Thus the motivation factor must also be adjusted accordingly.

My fourth hope in pedagogical writing is that the material be sufficiently challenging. In philology for undergraduates, frequent opportunity for give and take, for feedback, struggle and accomplishment is called for. Whereas traditional graduate level manuals are merely content to present an exhaustive exposition of the material, our chapters should include at regular intervals sections where the student can spot-check his own stage of comprehension. References could indicate where the answer was to be found or further studied in case of anything missed. I am finding

constantly that today's undergraduate strongly prefer some frequent type of "quiz option" which tells them where they stand and how they areppprogressing. Our forthcoming Introduction challenges them with this option.

Lastly, a fifth wish (I am reminded here of Juvenal's treatise on the Vanity of Human Wishes) would be that all our teaching and writing be goal-oriented. Maybe that sounds like cute jargon, but I don't mean it that way at all. I simply mean that we keep in mind the level we are seeking to attain with a given group, and not let ourselves go beyond. This final point is, I suppose, andextension of the first, namely to be basic and comprehensive. But it has further implications since in considering goals, we look beyond this book or this course and comtemplate "what comes next". It may be nothing; a given student may be a so-called "terminal case". Or, he may be next year's major. In either case we should write and teach providing for future options, constructing, as it were, a framework of which only certain compartments are completely or nearly completely outfitted. But still, the whole (comprehensive) structure is "roughed-out" and could be filled in later. The goal-oriented course or text has a sense of timing and pacing. It does not see itself as a finished product but

rather as a complete and thorough network which provides a meaningful starting point for any eventual pursuit of that subject. It is alpha, beta and perhaps gamma, but never alpha and omega.

In line with the thinking of this last point, our Series' first pedagogical publication, An Introduction to Indo-European Philology, will attempt to instill a sensitivity to the principles of philological investigation rather than trying to cram into one book all there is to say about it.

Preparing pedagogical materials for the undergraduate level is no elementary task. There are substantial problems. But the substantial task and potential gain would seem enormously worthwhile.